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ABSTRACT

A study examined what kinds of books middle schoolers will read when given the freedom to choose. Subjects were 55 children of middle-class parents enrolled in 2 sections of eighth-grade English at a university laboratory school. Of the original population of 55 students, 7 elected not to have data from their reading included, and records were not available for 12 more students at the time of data compilation after the school year had ended. The teacher had a holistic philosophy and structured her classes along the workshop lines laid out by Nancy Atwell's book "In the Middle." Students kept lists of the books they read and kept reading journals. Results indicated that: (1) the median number of books read during the school year was 13; (2) in descending order, students read books in the genres of teen issues, romance, mystery/suspense, supernatural/horror, fantasy, and science fiction; (3) with a single exception, students who read books in the romance and teen issues genres were girls; (4) fantasy and science fiction books, also with one exception, were read only by boys; (5) girls read two books for every book read by boys; (6) many of the books read by the students were of low literary quality; but (7) the majority of students who read "subliterature" were also the most prolific readers. Findings suggest that adolescents read a great deal of fairly low quality literature, but that this subliterature has the potential to act as a bridge to higher quality reading. (Contains 28 references.) (RS)

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Nothing in the Middle:
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NOTHING IN THE MIDDLE:
WHAT MIDDLE SCHOOLERS ARE READING

Seven years ago Nancie Atwell published her groundbreaking work, In the Middle (1985). Since that time, countless teachers from the upper elementary grades through high school and college have been influenced by this book. Reading and writing workshops in which students are provided time, choice, and response have proliferated, and our profession has investigated the effects of these basic principles on student reading and writing. One of the questions that has occurred to me regarding these principles is this: Given the freedom to choose, what kinds of books will middle school students read? I recently had the opportunity to investigate this question at my university's laboratory school.

The majority of the 55 students in the school's two sections of eighth grade English were the children of middle-class parents. Unlike many lab schools, the population was drawn from its surrounding neighborhood like regular public schools, rather than from a list of applicants. The ethnicity was nearly completely white, including only two African-Americans and one Hindustani. Susan Brink, the eighth grade Language Arts teacher with whom I worked, had a holistic philosophy and structured her classes along the workshop lines laid out by Atwell. Susan also felt it important to conduct whole-group instruction and experiences from time to time in order to demonstrate certain aspects of reading and writing and to help build a collaborative community of learners (Rief, 1992).

Questions of Choice

In most workshop settings, including the one employed by Susan, students have great freedom to select their own reading matter. Susan did assign certain readings from time to time, and the demonstrations she provided to her students of her own literary tastes and preferences were at least in part intended to suggest quality examples of reading that students might choose; the power of such demonstrations by competent and trusted adults to foster learning is well-known (Cambourne, 1988; Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984; Wells, 1986). In the end, though, and in accordance with the research which supports the importance of empowering learners by

giving them a significant degree of choice (Caine & Caine, 1991; Hansen, 1987), it was the workshop students themselves who chose what they would read. One question I wanted to address, then, was how students would use their empowered status in selecting books -- what would they choose to read, and how much would they choose to read? A second question dealt with the quality of the books chosen. Would they veer toward the more commercial? The more literary? A mix? Or take off in directions I could not predict? A final question which emerged only when the data started to accumulate dealt with the ways in which gender affected what and how much was read.

One caution is that this data about the books the students read must be contextualized within the wider circle of their overall literacy. For instance, at one point I surveyed the students about which periodicals they had available in their homes. The average home subscribed to three periodicals, and the range of periodical type was extremely wide -- from general news and world events magazines to the most obscure of hobby magazines. At least one study suggests that adolescent reading of magazines is prevalent and declines less than book reading (Heather, 1982). Thus, we cannot assume that what appeared in the lists and journals composed the whole of what was being read. However, the books discussed here did make up the most significant portion of the students' reading.

What follows is a description of the kinds of books these students chose to read and my reflections on some of the significant aspects of those choices. In tracking the number and types of books the students read, I found many previous research findings duplicated. In fact, I was quite amazed at how closely the reading interests of this rather small sample of students paralleled those of much larger and more randomized groups. However, while validation of previous research is surely valuable, some new findings and questions also surfaced.

How Much Did They Read?

One way to examine the reading of the students was simply to count how many books they read. The lists and journals included some 627 books read by 36 of the students, 19 of them female and 17 male. Of the remaining 19 students from the original population of 55, seven

elected not to have data from their reading included in the study. For the other twelve, at the time of the compilation of data (soon after the end of the school year), records were not available because the students had taken their lists and papers home. Of the 627 books recorded, 426 different titles were listed. The other 201 entries represented readings of the same title by different readers. These numbers yield a mean of 17.4 books read per student during the school year, with a range running from three to 68.

It was somewhat disheartening to note that some students recorded as few as three or four books read. However, the median number of books read (the number at which half of the students read more and half less) was 13, indicating that the great majority of students were reading well more than a book a month. Also, the data described here was gathered from the lists the students kept of the books they read and/or from the reading journals they kept. It should be noted that these records were not always accurate; Susan commented that several students read far more than was indicated by their lists and/or journals. In terms of numbers of books read, then, this report is conservative.

It is not unusual in more traditional classrooms, where reading choices and time are not as readily available as they are in workshops, to find some students who read little or nothing outside of assigned work -- and often not even that. Our conferences with students tended to confirm that within these workshops, everybody was reading something; some were simply much more voracious in their reading than others. It would be interesting to compare numbers of books read by students in more traditional settings to see whether there are differences in the number of books read in those classrooms and in the workshop settings such as the one studied in this research. However, such comparative data is not available.

The books were categorized in a number of different ways. The most revealing categories turned out to be Genre of Books and Books Read by Gender. As described in the following sections, these categories led me to consider some of the emotional states of adolescence as reflected in reading choices, gender issues which surfaced in the examination of the data, and issues regarding the relatively low literary quality of many of the books.

Favorite Genres

I placed the books read by the students in categories of types and genres based on my own best judgments. Many works defied simple categorization. In some cases, particular books could easily have been placed in any of several categories. However, in compiling quantitative data from the disparate entries, I was forced to make a final judgment about which genre a work might be most closely associated with. These judgments were informed by my own knowledge about adolescent and popular literature and by other professional sources.

Students read from a fairly wide variety of genres, but just a few of these dominated. The most popular genres (followed in parentheses by the number of separate titles read in each) were Teen Issues (79), Romance (72), Mystery/Suspense (61), Supernatural/Horror (54), Fantasy (42), and Science Fiction (31). Other genres which had some readership included Historical Fiction (17), Contemporary Fiction (14), Biography/Autobiography (12), Adventure (9), Non-fiction (7), Humor (6), Mythology (3), and Essay (2). Some explanation of the major categories is needed.

Teen Issues was a category I devised to account for the large number of books which were either about concerns at the forefront of teen culture -- teenage pregnancy or acceptance by a peer group, for instance -- or about concerns of the public at large but discussed from the viewpoint of teen narrators and audiences -- stories about teens with AIDS, for instance. Many of the books categorized as Romance could as easily have been identified as Teen Issues; these books often involved both teenage romance and social concerns. In such cases, categories were chosen based on what seemed to be the major thrust of the books. The characteristic used to distinguish between Mystery/Suspense and Supernatural/Horror was the absence or presence of supernatural occurrences or beings, though the main calling card for both genres seemed to be the presence of frightening and suspenseful situations. The characteristic which distinguished between Fantasy and Science Fiction was the degree to which the world presented in the book could be reasonably extrapolated from our present world -- the more reasonable the extrapolation, the more the book leaned toward classification as Science Fiction rather than Fantasy. The Contemporary Fiction category was composed of books which were not

necessarily intended for adolescents and which were popular in the culture at large; Robert Waller's The Bridges of Madison County (1992) is one example. Certainly, this is a romance novel, but its public readership seemed more widely distributed than that of, say, Danielle Steele novels, which I placed in the Romance genre.

Combining Genres to Reveal Excess

Middle school students experience a wide range of emotions at very high levels of intensity -- this is not news to anyone who has taught or raised children of this age. Research on developmental characteristics of adolescents is replete with evidence of their varied and intense emotional states and the swift pendulum swings between them (Dusek, 1991; Georgiady & Romano, 1977, 22-23; Priesser, Anders, & Gilder, 1990). In many ways the books the students chose to read reflected on and mediated those emotional states. This became clear to me when I combined certain of the genres which were closely related in their emotional tone and focus.

The Romance and Teen Issues categories, for example, accounted for nearly a quarter of all books read (24%), and the emotions present in these two categories were very similar in their extremes. The students who read these books -- with a single exception they were girls -- seemed to want to experience vicarious emotions at the far range of their potentials; they wanted to know how deep sadness could be and how wildly wonderful falling in love could be. They wanted to experience hottest jealousy and the most rapturous joy. It may well be that their purpose, conscious or otherwise, was to "try on" adult experience, to become -- at least vicariously -- a woman, according to their current romanticized understanding of womanhood. Such exploration of gender roles is typical of childhood and adolescence (Dusek, 1991; Liben & Signorella, 1987).

The categories of Mystery/Suspense and Supernatural/Horror (a combined 18% of all books read) also shared a common extreme emotion -- fear. Students reading these books seemed to want to know "how scary 'scared' can be." The works of writers such as Stephen King, R. L. Stine, and Christopher Pike, which made up the bulk of these two categories, undoubtedly owe their popularity to the need of many adolescents to test their capacity for fear.

All the emotions associated with fear are abundant in these books -- mounting suspense, doubt and apprehension, waves of horror, revulsion or climactic primal terror, gushing relief, etc. Psychologists may tell us that this need is actually indicative of adolescents' fear of their loss of childhood or of not being accepted by peers (Georgiady & Romano); whatever the reason for it, the need to feel these feelings was obvious from the quantity of selection.

A final combination of genres revealed different emotional needs. Both Fantasy and Science Fiction (12% of all books read) allow readers to escape the known world. In the books from these popular categories, two themes seemed to undergird such escape. Some of the works were pure heroic high adventure; a sub-genre often termed "Sword and Sorcery" was the dominant type within the Fantasy category. These books feature worlds of magicians, knights, duels, grand causes and quests, far-flung wars and climactic battles. Tolkein's The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings trilogy are perhaps the seminal examples of such work, but there are many others, often in series. In every case but one in this study, these books were read by boys. In every case, the books themselves featured heroic characters who exemplified the traditional man-as-hero stereotype. As with the Romance/Teen Issues combination, this aspect of Fantasy/Science Fiction seemed to speak to a need to find out what it might be like to be an adult, specifically a man, at least according to the reader's current romanticized perceptions of what manhood is.

A second aspect of this combination of categories spoke to the humor and idealism of adolescents. The great majority of Science Fiction books read were from Douglas Adams' A Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy series. These books, like much other Science Fiction, make use of alternate worlds and alien civilizations to parody human frailties. Adams' alien societies, which feature such traits as inept bureaucracy or crass greed or criminality disguised as social consciousness, are caricatured. The students who read these books -- all boys -- found great humor in them but also seemed to feel and vicariously protest the breaks with ideals and morals which they found lampooned in these books and of which they were beginning to be aware in their own world. Much of the writing these boys produced echoed these elements of chaotic,

nearly existential disgust with the difference between what the world is and the way their elders have represented it to them. Again, excessiveness was noted here, both in the degree to which ideals were held and in the degree of negative response to the recognition of the loss of ideals.

The six categories discussed above, combined into their three paired categories, accounted for 54% of the books cataloged. While the diversity of material read by the students was noted earlier, it must be emphasized that this diversity was invested within the framework of common themes indicated by these six categories. These students did have wide-ranging reading interests, but in many cases these interests were overshadowed by the overwhelming concerns of adolescent development as reflected in the genres which dominated their reading. They were experiencing extreme emotions and reading about extreme emotions -- there was very little in the middle. Such mood swings are, of course, developmental and to be expected. Time and experience, one hopes, will lead to balance and reflection. However, the point here is that the books the students chose were ones which helped them in their explorations at their current developmental stage. What teachers can do is support them in their interests at their current stage while showing them ever more mature and reflective works.

Gender Concerns

It became evident early on that girls were reading a great deal more than boys. The sample for this data included nearly even numbers of boys (17) and girls (19). Yet girls read two books for every book read by boys (412 or 66% for girls versus 215 or 34% for boys). This was not a matter of a few girls reading voluminously and so skewing the results. Three of the girls did read far more than the average, but so did several of the boys. The most important part factor here is that the largest cluster of female students read in the proximity of 10 to 20 books during the school year while the largest cluster of males read in the proximity of five to 10 books. As noted earlier, the data reviewed here excluded 19 of the 55 students; however, both my observations and Susan's indicated that this general trend was as true for those not included as for those whose records made up the data pool.

It would appear, then, that for this age group the most fundamental reading choice of all -- choosing whether or not to read -- is related to gender. My experience with this age group and my conversations with classroom teachers at the middle level tend to confirm this conclusion, as does at least one previous survey (Thomason, 1983) -- girls choose to read more frequently than boys. Several questions for further research are suggested by this finding: What causes the relationship of gender to the frequency of reading and the relative valuing of reading it suggests? Are cultural gender expectations a factor in forming reading habits and the general valuing of reading, and if so, in what ways? Are these findings consistent for other age groups? If not, at what age does the discrepancy begin and/or end and why? And if the discrepancy is as true for adults as it is for adolescents, what implications does this have for literacy, gender roles, power structures, and other related constructs in adult culture? If literacy is an indication of reflectiveness and thoughtfulness, and if we value such traits, and if women are generally better read than men, are the wrong people captaining the ship? The current strain of feminist thinking and writing echoes many of these concerns; the data presented here simply reinforces it.

A second gender issue is related to the types of material chosen by girls and boys. They chose distinctly different kinds of works to read, and the distinctions were rigidly upheld -- only one girl crossed over into the distinctly male realm of Science Fiction/Fantasy, for instance, and only one boy read as much as a single work from the Romance genre. The Teen Issues genre was heavily dominated by female readers. Other surveys have reported similar tastes by gender (Gallo, 1983; Thomason), and, in fact, it is a given in the publishing world that some books are aimed at males and some at females.

The selection of genres by gender seems clearly related to other gender identification behaviors which emerge strongly during the early teen years and which are on display in any middle and junior high school one might visit. Teachers of this age group know well that adolescents have a strong interest in the traditional gender roles inherent in our culture. Boys tend to identify with traditional male values. Their interests run to sports and machines and other elements of the overtly physical world; their humor is often rough and increasingly bawdy;

their relationships with their peers are often of the rowdy "good ol' boy" type, and their outward manifestations of interest in girls are dominated either by professions of physical attraction only or of chivalrous gallantry -- all traditional male attitudes of the American culture.

Girls, on the other hand, tend to explore more traditionally feminine behaviors. They show interest in personal feelings and relationships with others -- especially romantic relationships and friendships -- and they gravitate towards the arts. Again, these are all very traditional; girls explore the softer sides of their nature while boys explore the harder. The reading choices made by both boys and girls parallel these explorations of traditional roles.

It is true that current attempts to make gender roles and expectations more open and equal have made some inroads with adolescents; some discussions in these eighth-grade classes, for instance, were centered around a growing sense of what is gender-appropriate and what is not, especially for females. But in the halls and the malls through which these adolescents moved, when they were together off on their own and away from adult supervision, and often in the books they chose to read, it was the traditional roles which dominated. Those who would pursue different and more equitable gender roles and expectations for our culture than the traditionally dominant ones should understand how deeply entrenched these traditional roles are with this age group -- the very age group in which sexual identity is being firmly established.

Subliterature and Quality Issues

A final and related area of concern was with the relatively low quality of many of the books which were read, especially in the categories of Romance, Mystery/Suspense, and Supernatural/Horror. Specific authors and titles included here are V. C. Andrew's Flowers in the Attic and Heaven series, Cherie Bennett's Sunset Island series, Lurlene Mcdaniel's One Last Wish series, and the horror and suspense novels of Stephen King, Christopher Pike and R. L. Stine. Other such works appeared on the list as well, but the ones listed here were the most popular. Certainly, citing these works as being of relatively low literary quality is a value judgment; additionally, determining which books belong to this sub-class and which don't is problematical. Some, for instance, might argue that the Andrews and King's works are not the

qualitative equivalents of the Sunset Island books. However, the differences lie more in the intended audiences -- the former two being intended as much for adults as for adolescents -- than in literary quality. I believe I am accurate in classifying these, along with the others, as "subliterature," according to prevailing professional opinions (Carlsen,1972; Ellis, 1985, 94-98; Small, 1992, 277-285). The works of all these authors share certain characteristics which separate them from more authentically literate literature.

Carlsen enumerates the characteristics which separate subliterature from higher quality work, many of which apply to the works cited above. Primary among these are (1) patterned and extremely predictable plots, reflecting little interest on the part of the author in unique creative artistry; (2) a high degree of wish fulfillment and/or visceral thrill but very superficial treatment of the human condition, and (3) the appearance of literary sophistication veiling a very superficial use of language. The Sunset Island series, in which three recently graduated high school girls go through a breathtaking sequence of romances and adventures in circles of the rich and famous, is a near-perfect exemplar of these characteristics. Each book features one of the three girls falling in love and/or experiencing danger; each features language which at times sounds sophisticated but is dominated by very pedestrian prose; and in each the plots and characters are stereotyped and completely predictable.

A danger of teen romances (of which the Sunset books are but one example of many) is that they often suggest misleading or false assumptions to their readers. Carlsen lists these misperceptions among others:

-- Adolescents are more perceptive and better than adults;

-- Personality can undergo dramatic change in a short period of time;

-- Physical appearance is the most important personal characteristic and indicates the quality of one's character;

-- Love and physical attraction are the only prerequisites for an enduring relationship;

-- People are either good or bad;

-- The wealthy tend to be corrupt and evil while the poor or middle class are good.

(Paradoxically, the trappings of the rich -- fashionable clothes, cars, residences, and other material goods, as well as expensive hobbies and pursuits -- are often of extreme, almost overriding importance to the protagonists).

Hearkening back to earlier discussion, many of these attributes clearly feature excess. Characters who inhabit these romances alternately live out heaven (being in love with and loved back by a rich and/or famous and/or gorgeous and/or good person; being surrounded by wonderful friends) and hell (falling out of love with that same person; being deserted by those same friends). They dress in the most chic clothes and look waifishly innocent and devilishly sexy. They may travel to far-off places and meet famous people and, in the process, also meet salt-of-the-earth poor people (who may somehow look and dress every bit as good as the globe trotters). These books are rife with contradictions, implausibilities, and escapism. It doesn't seem to matter, though, to their readers -- they live out their fantasies of what they hope adult life might be like through them.

Other forms of subliterature feature their own brand of excess. McDaniel's One Last Wish series, for instance, focuses on tragic medical situations. Diseased or crippled characters are introduced, shown to be admirable and worthy, and then die, evoking great sympathy and pathos. The Andrews books, written on a more adult level (at least in terms of general vocabulary and plot complexities), feature broken family situations of tragic yet heroic proportions. Alarmingly, sex and violence are often paired in these works (as in King's), at least through inference, and the former is often associated with sadism or other psychopathologies rather than with more positive and healthy associations. The Stine and Pike books typically take the idealized teen world set forth in works such as Sunset Island and twist it with horror, adding visceral careening roller-coaster terror to the mix discussed above.

Attesting to the popularity of subliterature in this study, Andrews, Bennett, McDaniel, and Pike were four of the five most popular authors listed in terms of numbers of books read, accounting for 91 entries (45 separate titles). Along with Douglas Adams, author of the Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy series (20 entries, five titles), these writers were far ahead of any

others. Seventeen of the 36 students represented in the data, almost half, read at least one of these 91 subliterate entries. Two read as many as 15 titles from the four authors listed above; in one of these cases, all 15 were from Bennett's Sunset Island series. Echoing the discussion of gender issues, it should be noted that 15 of the 17 students reading these books were girls; one boy read two Andrews books, and one boy read one Pike book. Other studies have found similar results, both in terms of the popularity of subliterature and the gender-related selection of subliterate genres (Parish & Atwood, 1984; Thomason).

Reflecting on Subliterature

Many of the more superficial and commercialized aspects of our culture dominate the subliterature discussed here; reflection and thoughtfulness are the exceptions. In most cases superficial values and out-of-control emotions are aggrandized rather than eschewed. The constant tendency of subliterature to present the most extreme human situations -- idealized romantic relationships, perfect friendships, and material well-being on the one hand, and beatings, murders, kidnappings, cripplings, fatal disease, tragic love affairs, and betrayals, on the other -- in order to engender the most extreme reader emotions is obvious to the most casual of observers. And subliterary excess, of course, is not limited to adolescent literature; it is ubiquitous throughout the media-dominated world of the adolescent. These characteristics may well remind the reader of countless television shows, movies, music videos, records, and teen magazines on the market. It is understandable, then, that some might be alarmed at the possible effects of such reading. With Alleen Pace Nilsen (1984), we may be depressed at the glaringly low quality of such fare and fearful at the false expectations it may engender in its readers. However, several factors seem to argue against placing too much negative emphasis on the importance of subliterature in the development of adolescents and their reading habits. These books are, perhaps, extremely distasteful to adults, but they are most likely essentially harmless.

While a great deal of subliterature is read by adolescents, so are many other kinds of literature. In this study, it is revealing to go beyond the writers of subliterature and examine other favored authors. Each of the following writers appeared at least five times on the student

lists, indicating significant readership: Lloyd Alexander, Isaac Asimov, Avi, Carolyn Cooney, Eve Bunting, Marilyn Levy, Lois Lowry, Norma Fox Mazer, Gloria Miklowitz, Joan Lowry Nixon, Joan Thesman, J. R. R. Tolkein, and Elizabeth White. These are some of the finest and most widely admired writers in the field. This listing makes clear that students in the study were not limited in their reading to just subliterature. It must also be recalled that it was the students themselves who chose these higher quality works, just as they chose the lower; in neither case were the books assigned. We cannot assume, then, that adolescent readers will always choose to read poor quality literature.

Significantly, the majority of students who read the subliterature were also the most prolific readers in the study; not only were they reading subliterature, they were reading other works of much higher quality as well. The girl who read 15 Sunset Island books, for instance, also read works by Mazer, Bunting, Nixon, and Robert Peck. All of the students who read the subliterature cited here also read at least one piece, and usually more, of adolescent literature which is recognized as being of significant quality in the field.

Others have found subliterature to have the potential to act as a bridge to higher quality reading (Fong, 1990, 137-140; Kelly, 1991, 19-21). The above discussion indicates that this is so. It should be noted, however, that Susan's teaching was also an important factor. Her comments in conferences and in the students' reading journals often affirmed their reading of subliterature -- she did not belittle it -- while leading them to works of higher quality and to more sophisticated and mature interpretations of the subliterature itself. Thus, in considering the potential for lower quality work to lead to higher, we should not assume that it will happen automatically. The understanding and leadership of the competent adult reader/teacher is critical to the continued growth of the less mature reader.

As Carlsen makes clear, reading some lower quality work is not necessarily without value. Subliterature, by virtue of its very simplicity, can act as an easily understood template or blueprint for understanding literary structures such as plot and setting. Having read such works, the young reader may over time be better prepared to understand increasingly more refined and

literate works. In addition, immersion in texts which are easily read -- in which the reading process itself is not a labor – acts to increase reading fluency (Gillett & Temple, 1990). Students need to read a variety of texts at a variety of levels, independent as well as instructional.

Finally, the large and creditable body of constructivist and transactionalist research and thought, stretching back at least to Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) conception of reading as an active process, makes it clear that the effects of reading are not simple and straightforward. We cannot and must not assume that simply because students read a particular book they will take on whatever values or personal characteristics they find described or inferred in that book. Some who would control the reading choices of students fear this very thing. Such fear should be put to rest (Bosmajian, 1987, 89-96).

While the transformative potential of reading is undeniable (which of us has not been moved and changed by a book?), research makes it clear that readers do not simply or passively accept at face value all that they read. A good deal of research, in fact, makes clear just the opposite, that readers typically do not desert their existing beliefs and values on the basis of reading. Susan Neuman (1986), for instance, writes "Rather than changing opinions, reading tends to confirm our knowledge of issues and reinforces already established beliefs. Whatever conditions might occur to discontinue the spiral of reinforcement of predispositions, authorities agree, will not result from the reading material alone" (p.47).

Based on what they read, then, we might expect students to respond in a wide variety of ways, including the possible out-of-hand rejection of textual content. They might also question and wonder about either textual content or what that content says to them about their own belief structure; the reading of a text may even modify some beliefs. Any of these and more might characterize the variety of complex responses one may have to reading. But for an adolescent to abandon beliefs and deny prior experiences on the basis of reading alone, and especially the reading of the simplistic fantasies of subliterature being considered here, is simply not a reasonable scenario for the vast majority of readers.

What is much more likely in terms of the effects of subliterature is that it may satisfy some transient developmental needs without affecting basic belief structures. Mary Anne Moffitt (1987), for instance, identifies the following reasons for reading teen romances as indicated by a study of adolescent females: to gain information on sexuality, to practice vicariously experiences not yet available to them, to consider their approaching independence from parents, to escape the ordinariness of their current lives. All but the last can be viewed as passing developmental needs. The last, of course, helps to explain the popularity of adult as well as adolescent subliterary romances; Neuman (1985) found that many adult women continued to read romances because they provided temporary relief from anxieties and allowed them to indulge fantasies. None of these reasons speak to fundamental changes in core beliefs, philosophies, or religious holdings. For all of these reasons, then, we may feel a personal aversion to the subliterature being read by students, but we should not rush to condemn it. The wiser course, as documented by so many teachers in the last few years, is to continue to demonstrate our own reading of more mature works and our own reflective stance towards what we read, knowing that such demonstrations are the best guide for our students through the difficult transitions they face.

Conclusion

To a large degree, this study validates many of the findings of surveys from the past two decades. Adolescents still read a great deal of fairly low quality literature. Judging by the contents of many paperback sections of discount and grocery stores, of course, so do their adult counterparts. A good deal of what adolescents read appeals to emotional needs and states which are unique to their developmental levels. Questions as to the significance of such findings, however, especially in terms of gender and quality, deserve more attention in the profession. The students' choices of what to read in this study captured many of the feelings and concerns that we know dominate so much of their time and energy. As with other age groups, the literacy of adolescents is a window to their minds. We must continue to look through that window to help them in their growth toward adulthood.

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